


## Introduction

Students past kindergarten age generally don't arrive in our classes thrilled about writing. Many of them have the notion that writing is reserved only for the language arts class, and in some ways, their teachers may have even encouraged this attitude over the years by the assignments they have given (or avoided giving).



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In order to make the writing process an important component of learning in any class, we must first make sure that our students are comfortable with it. This takes effort by teachers in building a classroom climate that not only demands writing but has the necessary supports in place. In other words, we must have a writing community established before we can build competent content-area writers. Low-risk, engaging writing must precede higher-risk, intellectually rigorous writing.


### **What Should We, as Teachers, Do?**

If we believe that we need to integrate more writing into our classrooms, what kinds of writing should we assign, exactly? Generally, when teachers discuss cross-curricular writing, two broad terms are used: writing-to-learn (sometimes called expressive writing) and learning-to-write (sometimes called product writing). *Writing-to-learn* activities and assignments are designed more for a metacognitive effect. These are forms of writing in which it is most important for students to record their ideas, reflect upon their own learning, and grapple with unfamiliar content. When students create writing-to-learn texts, the goal is for them to learn more deeply. The emphasis is on content, and not on form or conventions. *Learning-to-write* activities, however, result in more polished products—the academic essay, the research report, and so on. These written products must show content-area learning plus competency in a particular written form.

Using both writing-to-learn and learning-to-write activities is beneficial, and this book will address both broad categories. Many teachers find that they first grow comfortable with using writing-to-learn activities and then move into helping students craft more polished products. This kind of cross-curricular “easing into” writing may be a perfect fit for you. If you are part of a collaborative team that is tackling writing, or if you have extensive experience with using learning-to-write assignments already, you may be able to utilize learning-to-write activities immediately. Whatever your situation, though, simply adding more nonfiction writing to your curriculum will benefit your students tremendously.

One of the best reminders about why students must write more comes from respected educator and author Lucy Calkins in 1994: “When students do short stints of writing, it can switch their brains from off to on. It can nudge them to question, summarize, notice, categorize” (page 489). Let’s think about how to switch our students’ brains “on” as we continue to explore the various applications of nonfiction writing in our classrooms.

Next you’ll find a place where you may do your own writing. This is to help you organize your thoughts and concerns about incorporating more nonfiction writing into your classroom. You will find an invitation to write at the end of each chapter.



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## **Start Emphasizing Writing-to-Learn Tomorrow**

Certainly you cannot attempt more than one or two activities outlined in this chapter—and execute them well—this week in your classes. Find several writing-to-learn assignments that seem comfortable for you and that match your current content. Try them out with your students. If possible, ask a colleague to do the same, and compare results. If a particular activity doesn't work well, how could you tweak it to improve the results, or, alternately, what activity might get at the same kinds of thinking and could possibly work better?

Starting on the journey is of the utmost importance. The more you ask your students to write and to solidify their thinking, the more they learn. The point is simply to begin.